



**CRUISING DOWN MEMORY LANES: (this page)**  
**'Going up' on the Rochdale Canal; (facing page)**  
**Between Luddenden foot and Sowerby Bridge on**  
**the Rochdale Canal; cruising through meadows on**  
**the Leeds-Liverpool canal near Skipton**



# CANAL BOATING IN YORKSHIRE

HIRING A CANAL NARROWBOAT TO EXPLORE ENGLAND'S PEACEFUL INLAND WATERWAYS OFFERS ENTRY INTO A UNIQUE AND FASCINATING WORLD

TEXT & PHOTOS: LEANNE WALKER/ANDREW MARSHALL

**"T**here is nothing – absolutely nothing – half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats," declared Ratty in *The Wind In The Willows*. Ourselves and countless other holiday sailors would certainly agree.

A network of canals crisscross the country from the Pennines to Oxford, the Cheshire Plain to the Welsh hills, all playing a vital role in the industrial history of Britain. Lumbering, horse-drawn wagons, which for centuries had carried the inland commerce of Britain, proved inadequate to cope with the growth of trade brought about by the Industrial Revolution

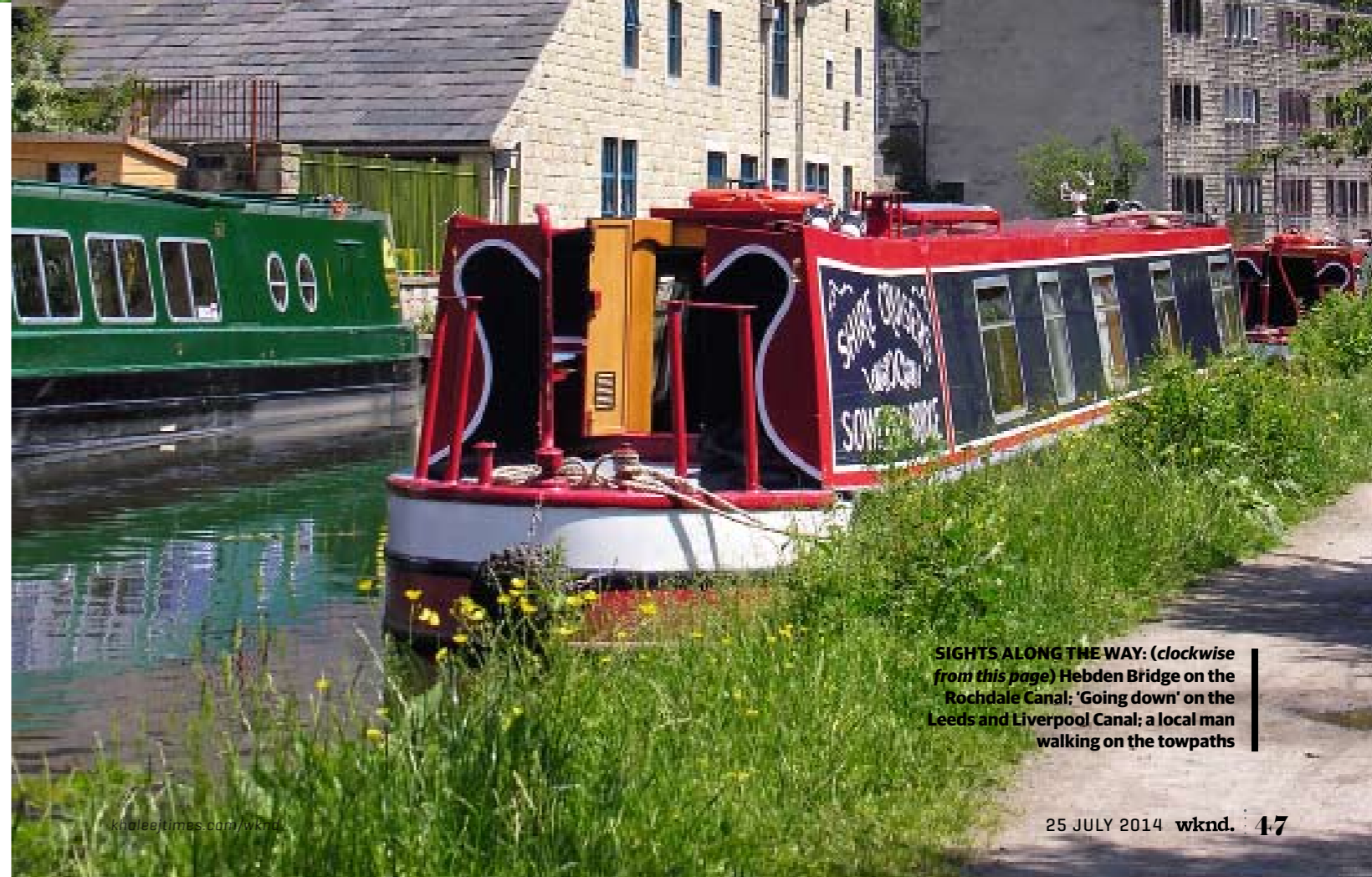
in the 18th century. The answer was found in canals and, from 1760 to 1840, more than 4,000 miles (6,400 km) of navigable waterways were engineered and built. A grand era for transport in Britain had begun.

Owing to the advent of faster, cheaper rail transport, the canal system has tended to fall into disuse. However, in recent years, the canals have witnessed a resurgence of interest with narrowboat enthusiasts paving the way for a thriving boat hire industry.

Imagine waking up to the pleasing sounds of water slapping idly against the bow and the sight of a flotilla of moorhens,



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swans and ducks all confidently waiting to share breakfast. Or picture savouring the mouth-watering smell of steaming coffee before setting off for a day's exploration of beautiful river and canal landscapes.

Our introduction into canal life begins on the Calder and Hebble Navigation – one of Yorkshire's most scenic waterways. We leave the Pennine town of Sowerby Bridge on a Monday afternoon for a four-day canal jaunt. It's like leaving the world that we knew behind. The canal is a ribbon of green running between the bricks and mortar of everyday life.

Nigel and Susan of Shire Cruisers put us through our paces at the three locks at Salterhebble. Simply and patiently they explain the technicalities of lock operation. It all sounds rather complicated but in turns out to be dead easy. "Plain logic," says Nigel who has been into boats for some 40 odd years. "It's doing everything in the right order, that's all. Practical experience is worth a thousand words. You'll be right."

A typical lock is a watertight compartment with gates at either end that are generally constructed from well-seasoned oak or elm and sometimes still fashioned with the old carpenter's tool, the adze. The lock gates can only be opened at one end or the other when the level either side of the gates is equal.

### History Channels

Most canals in the UK are maintained by the Canal & River Trust, previously the British Waterways, but a minority of canals are also privately owned; the UK was the first place in the world to acquire a canal network

**SIGHTS ALONG THE WAY:** (clockwise from this page) Hebden Bridge on the Rochdale Canal; 'Going down' on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal; a local man walking on the towpaths



**PIT STOPS:** (from top to bottom) The Rochdale Canal; a saloon inside the Hereford (Shire Cruisers); canal-side hangouts like The Colliers Arms (near Elland) offer moorings and meals

The only reason for opening the gates is to let a boat in or out of the lock. When the boat is in the lock, the top gates and the bottom gates are both closed, forming the watertight chamber. Then a special tool called a *windlass* is used to open *paddles* to allow water into the lock from above, or out into the lower level, depending on which way the boat is going. When the water is level with the lower (or upper) level, the gates at that end can be opened to let the boat out. It's an ingenious idea that enables canals and boat traffic to cross up and down over hills and dales.

From Salterhebble we are on our own; slipping along the canal ablaze with seasonal colours, dropping down off the Pennines through a valley on a secret course among the trees. To begin with the canal seems impossibly narrow, more so because of the reeds that grew on either side. Above these, in rich profusion grow small woodlands of birch, hawthorn, willow and alder orchestrated with the liquid song of robin, wren and blue tit. This, and the winding towpath flanked by a drystone wall are typical of the scenery we sbecome familiar with. In the late afternoon, we pass through the mill town of Elland. Remnants of the old mills border the canal banks with stonewall complete with mooring rings and graceful archways of former cargo loading bays. As the light thins, we begin to search for a snug mooring. 'The Colliers Arms', a canal side hangout provides the answer with its free visitor moorings.

In the coming days we settle into a leisurely pace, popping ashore when we want to investigate a canal side village, to shop for provisions for a meadow picnic or to seek out a local hostelry for a 'Boatman's Lunch.'

Most towns we pass through sport a cluster of narrowboats in a colourful combination of tradition and modern. A hundred years ago few boats were built from anything else other than wood. Oak-sided, elm-bottomed narrowboats slid silently along the canals hauled by gentle natured horses trudging along the towpath. In recent years, however, motors have replaced the horses and steel has become the favoured structural material for boats. We find that one of the great pleasures of our canal holiday is enjoying the friendly community spirit that prevails among canal folk. They always seem ready to pass the time of day or lend a hand when mooring or manoeuvring. There is never a shortage of invitations for cups of tea aboard another boat or for a few brews down the local.

A highly sociable life and a most agreeable holiday. Thinking about messing in boats for your next holiday? Take it from us – there's simply nothing half so much worth doing. **W**

## NARROW-BOAT FACT FILE:

### EASY HANDLING:

Simplified controls make narrowboat handling easier, and even if you are a novice, the trial run given to everyone before setting off independently, should turn you from landlubber to seasoned sailor in half an hour. Driving a car is ten times more complicated. If you are prone to seasickness, it's a pleasure to know that life on the canals is 'smooth sailing', no waves – no motion sickness.

**CHILDREN:** Children take readily to a boating life especially when encouraged to take part in manoeuvring and lock work. Sensible precautions should be taken and most boat hirers provide life jackets free of charge. Toddlers will be a liability unless there is someone to watch them constantly.

**COMFORT:** There's no roughing it on a narrowboat. Most come fully equipped with bed linen, cooker, fridge, pots and pans, hot and cold water, shower, stereo, toilet, television and central heating. Times have changed a bit since the working narrowboats.

*For further enquiries for narrowboat hire in the Yorkshire Pennine district, contact: Shire Cruisers: [www.shirecruisers.co.uk](http://www.shirecruisers.co.uk)*

